

Press Release - June 1, 2011

Body Mass Index Screening Results for Bedford, MA School Children - Grades 1, 4, 7 and 10

In January 2009, Massachusetts launched a broad-based state initiative to promote wellness and prevent overweight and obesity in Massachusetts called Mass in Motion. The purpose of this multifaceted campaign is to promote the importance of healthy eating and active living at home, at work, and in communities throughout the Commonwealth. One element of Mass in Motion is a statewide school-based Body Mass Index (BMI) collection and reporting regulation. This new regulation required that school systems measure the height and weight of public school students in grades 1, 4, 7 and 10 and use those figures to calculate their BMI percentile. BMI is a method of determining if a child has a healthy weight compared to other children of the same age and sex.

The Bedford Board of Health school nurses, who work in the Bedford schools, are responsible for oversight and reporting of the BMI screening results. The results of the screening are directly and confidentially communicated to the parents or guardians of each student. In addition, aggregate data is shared with local school and health officials and with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. No data on an individual student is shared with anyone other than that student's parents or guardians.

Following are the 2010-2011 findings of the BMI screening for the overweight and obese categories combined for grades 1, 4, 7 and 10. The data represent the percent of the total grade population tested in Bedford as compared to the Massachusetts (MA) grade average from 2009, the most recent statewide data available. The percentages are for the overweight and obese BMI categories combined as that is how the state reports their data: 1st grade - 12% in Bedford vs. 32% in MA; 4th grade - 28% in Bedford vs. 38% in MA; 7th grade - 28% in Bedford vs. 36% in MA; and, 10th grade 21% in Bedford vs. 31% in MA.

Children with a high BMI percentile are more likely to become overweight or obese adults and be at a higher risk for diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. Helping children attain a healthy weight now, and stay at a healthy weight, may prevent serious illness later in life. BMI is a "weight for height for age" index that can be a useful tool in early identification of possible health risk factors among children and youth. It should be noted that specific BMI-for-age charts were used to calculate accurate BMIs for Bedford school children as adult BMI percentile calculators do not provide accurate results for children and adolescents.

While the total percentage of overweight and obese students in Bedford, for all grades screened, was lower than the state average, the data indicates that 22% of Bedford's students are either overweight or obese. The Board of Health and the School Department are committed to working with students, families and the community-at-large to address this issue. While the BMI screening requirement is assessing individual status, it is important to look at what we as a community are doing to provide individuals of all ages the opportunity to engage in healthy behaviors. There is a lot happening in Bedford! The schools have worked to offer healthier choices within food service; the Safe Routes to School program sponsored a successful walk/bike to school event; the Bedford Farmers' Market provides an additional resource for fresh fruit and vegetables; and, the Board of Health and the Bedford Youth Task Force are applying for grants to improve access to information on healthy eating and exercise and to develop a repository of information on local health

and wellness opportunities for Bedford families. These are just a few examples of how Bedford is working to provide children and adults the opportunity to be more physically active and eat healthy foods. The Board of Health encourages the Bedford community to continue to work together to create a healthier community and looks forward to collaborating with others towards this end.

The school nurses have already received some positive feedback from parents and guardians on the BMI screening program. Many have expressed gratitude for this screening program as it has provided an opportunity for dialogue about healthy eating and exercise with their child. Parents and guardians should contact their school nurse with any questions they may have about the BMI screening, or their child's health care provider with any questions on how the results may impact their child's health. The Board of Health has included links to health and wellness resources for improving BMI results in the Health and Wellness section of their website at www.bedfordma.gov/health.